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Press Release
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Release Number: 0507-07

May 15, 2007

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Military artist James Dietz donates original oil painting to Fort Polk's Geronimos

Elements for this article were provided by the Geronimo Association

FORT POLK, La. —The 1st Battalion (Airborne), 509th Infantry (Geronimos) will hold an unveiling ceremony for "You Have Your Orders", an original oil painting depicting the first U.S. Army Airborne Battalion combat jump, by military artist James Dietz, on at 9 a.m. on Friday, May 18, in Huff Hall, here.

Dietz, who was commissioned to do the painting by the Geronimo Association, is donating the painting so it can remain on display at the 1/509th INF memorial Huff Hall. Following the unveiling, Dietz will sign limited edition prints for the Geronimos.

"You Have Your Orders", depicts the events of Nov. 7, 1942, as the first of 39 C-47s took to the air carrying the 2nd Battalion, 509th Parachute Infantry into the history books as the first U.S. Army Airborne Battalion to jump into combat. Before the first paratrooper exited the door, the Battalion had flown more than 1600 miles from England to North Africa, completing the longest airborne invasion ever attempted.

Eisenhower's Allied Force Headquarters had two plans for the invasion due to their lack of knowledge on the extent of the French resistance in North Africa. The War Plan would be enacted if the French decided to fight and the Peace Plan would be initiated if the French accepted the Allies as comrades in arms. Lt. Col. Edson D. Raff, the 509th Battalion commander, also proposed two plans based on the French resistance.

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If the Peace Plan was in effect, he would air land his Battalion at the airfield at La Senia. If the War Plan was in effect, he would conduct a mass tactical parachute jump between La Senia and Tafaraoui airfields followed by a simultaneous seizure of each. One company was assigned the mission to attack La Senia and the remainder of the Battalion would attack Tafaraoui.

The day prior to the Battalion's departure, Raff spoke to the Battalion in mass for the last time. Unsure if they would be greeted with cheers or bullets, he told his Battalion, "We're going to have a difficult job because some people down there will want to fight us and some won't. If they welcome us, and some authorities say they will, we won't fire a round. If they don't, you have your orders!"

From an England airfield, on Nov. 7 1942 at 5 p.m., Raff received the message that the Peace Plan was in effect. As in all combat situations, the plan changed dramatically while in flight to Algeria. After flying in darkness through stormy weather over Spain, with a strong easterly wind, the formation of aircraft became scattered during the eight-hour flight. As the sun creased the horizon over North Africa, the 39 C-47s arrived dispersed, miss-orientated, and critically low on fuel. Several planes tried to land at the La Senia airfield as planned, but small arms and ack-ack fire prevented them from landing.

At this point, it became obvious that the War Plan was now in effect. Because of a lack of fuel, several C-47s were forced to land in Sebkra Doran, a dry lakebed. Once on the ground, the planes and paratroopers received small arms fire from the high ground to their north.

Raff, along with five other C-47s, flew over and observed the consolidation of multiple C-47s parked on the desert floor and paratroopers digging hasty fighting positions among the planes. Raff received a radio message from Col. Bentley, the overall Task Force commander, stating that forces on the ground were under attack by a force of an undetermined size and that an armored force was moving toward their position. Based on low fuel in his C-47, drastic changes on the battlefield causing activation of the War Plan and the approaching armored force, Raff made the decision to jump, in order to assist his exposed paratroopers on the desert floor.

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Raff informed his pilots to locate a drop zone along the high ground overlooking the armored advance and where the unit was receiving ground fire. He directed his pilots to radio the remaining five C-47s in order to notify the Jumpmasters to prepare their paratroopers to follow his lead as he exited the aircraft.

At approximately 8:15 a.m. on Nov. 8, 1942, Raff, yelled over his shoulder, "Stand In The Door!" to his fellow paratroopers. The jumpers in the rear of the plane moved up until all were lock step behind their commander. As the bell rang, he led the 509th Parachute Infantry into history and validated the new tactical maneuver that we still use today, the vertical envelopment. The 509th would complete their mission and move to the Tafaraoui airfield where they linked up with armored forces moving in from the beach. The 509th would make an additional four combat jumps during World War II, which was more combat jumps than any unit in the Army. Their adaptability and tenacity lives on today in all airborne units throughout the United States Army.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Although the initial focus of artist James Dietz's was aviation and World War I art, he has quickly become a premier talent in capturing military ground action from World War II to the present. His military paintings are currently displayed in such organizations as the 82nd Airborne Museum at Fort Bragg, the Armor Museum at Fort Knox, The Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth and the 116th Infantry Museum. James Dietz is a master at capturing the mood, setting, machinery and the people in his original oil paintings. Each event portrayed is meticulously researched to ensure accuracy and historical detail. This attention to detail has made him a favorite of military collectors.

ALGERIA-FRENCH MOROCCO



"YOU HAVE YOUR ORDERS"

The 509th Parachute Battalion conducts the first airborne assault on 8 November 1942 onto Sekra d' Oran, North Africa after a 1600 mile flight from England in support of OPERATION TORCH.

by
James Dietz



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Baltimore, MD 21202

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